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Salem Witch Trials

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Source: *OAH Magazine of History*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Witchcraft (Jul., 2003), pp. 32-36

Published by: Oxford University Press on behalf of Organization of American Historians

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25163620>

Accessed: 02-09-2016 07:06 UTC

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# Salem Witch Trials

The Salem witch trials of 1692 have become a prominent feature of the American cultural consciousness. This is due largely to Nathaniel Hawthorne's fictional works, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953), and also some popular nonfiction books, like Marion Starkey's *The Devil in Massachusetts* (1949) as well as more scholarly works, principally Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum's *Salem Possessed* (1974) and Carol Karlsen's *Devil in the Shape of a Woman* (1987).

The witch trials are often taken as a lens to view the whole Puritan period in New England and to serve as an example of religious prejudice, social persecution, and superstition. While each of these views is appropriate, the words and deeds of the actual people involved have generally been passed over because the original court records have not been readily available. Thus the witchcraft episode is often reduced to an irrational social aberration or the result of ergot food poisoning, a disease caused by moldy rye or other cereals, and the people involved are reduced to one-dimensional stereotypes.

This lesson plan emphasizes two things: using primary source documents to analyze the seventeenth-century court records of the witch trials; and using artistic interpretations to analyze the ways in which the witchcraft episode has been represented by later generations in images.

## Time

This lesson plan is in two parts and will hopefully be completed in two or three class meetings.

## National Standards

This lesson plan addresses National Standards 2 and 3 in Standards in Historical Thinking by asking students to look at both primary sources and images used to represent the Salem Witchcraft trials to later generations. It also fulfills the standards in 1B Era 2: "demonstrate understanding of family life, gender roles, and women's rights in colonial North America."

## Part I

The purpose of the first part of this lesson is to engage students in thinking about primary sources by asking them to look carefully at what people actually said in the records of the courtroom scenes. While attention often focuses on Judge Hathorne and the "afflicted" girls, the wonderful thing about the court records is that they recorded the voices of the accused and conveyed their own words of defense, their occasional laughter, frequent outbursts of sarcasm, their bewilderment and incredulity, and, above all their

undaunted affirmations of innocence. There is also the fascinating drama of the court room scene. This is what inspired Arthur Miller's play, *The Crucible*, and what makes it so dramatically effective.

## Documents:

First Examination of Tituba

Examinations of:

Sarah Osborne	John Alden
Elizabeth Proctor and Sarah Cloyse	
Abigail Dane Faulkner Sr.	Sarah Good
Rebecca Nurse	Susannah Martin
Martha Carrier	Martha Cory
Sarah and Richard Carrier	Ann Pudeator
Bridget Bishop	

Find these documents by going to the web page for the *Salem Witchcraft Papers* at <<http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/texts/transcripts.html>>. This page displays the link for each of the three volumes of court records, which are arranged alphabetically in each volume. For example, Volume I contains the "Case" for Bridget Bishop. Click on the "Case Bridget Bishop Executed, June 10, 1692." This will open a new web page with the full case record of all the documents for Bridget Bishop. The first two items in her Case Record are the transcriptions of her two grand jury hearings, each called an "examination." Depending upon the grand jury's vote, the accused person was then held for trial or released. (According to the records, all but one was held over for trial.) There are, in fact, no records of the actual trials—these were either lost or deliberately destroyed and have not been seen since the seventeenth century. What has survived is a fairly complete set of the pretrial records that were used in the trials themselves: the depositions, arrest warrants, indictments, examinations, and so forth are extremely revealing.

The aim of this court was to find the witches—that is, the people living among them whose "specters" ("apparitions," "appearances") were allegedly tormenting the Village girls and causing harm, even death, to some of the villagers. For more background, go to <<http://jefferson.village.virginia.edu/salem/overview.html>>

The seventeenth-century writers of these legal documents—court clerks, constables, local town and village authorities—were not well educated. They did not use standardized spellings of words and in some cases struggled to render the rapidly spoken words in court, using abbreviations and colloquialisms that do not quite make sense to us today. But with a little patience and imagination the meaning can be made clear.

Students should look for the following things:

1) Does the judge assume guilt? Give an example, quoting Judge Hathorne's actual words. Why does he appear to assume the defendant is guilty?

2) Describe ways in which the judge and the accusing girls appear to be working together against the accused.

3) Sometimes there are references to "specters"—how would you define this concept?

4) Describe ways in which the accused person tries to defend herself/himself against the accusations. Why did these words have no effect?

5) At the end, is there evidence that the judge is trying to get the accused to confess to being a witch? What would happen if the accused did confess, as many did? Why did many refuse to confess?

6) What are the accused "witches" actually charged with? From the perspective of the twenty-first century, how can we judge their innocence or guilt?

Students at the University of Virginia have written a few analyses of these court room examinations, using the original documents. For an example, please visit the "Education" web page via our web site <<http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/>>.

John Hathorne and Jonathan Corwin presided over Bridget's examination on 19 April 1692. Many of her accusers were present at the examination, including Elizabeth Hubbard, Ann Putnam, Abigail Williams, Mercy Lewis, and Mary Walcott.

As soon as Bridget Bishop entered the courtroom, the afflicted girls fell into fits. Judge Hathorne asked in which witchcrafts she was conversant, to which she replied, "I take all this people (turning her head and eyes about) to witness that I am clear." Then Hawthorne asked the girls if Bishop had afflicted them, to which Elizabeth Hubbard, Ann Putnam, Abigail Williams, and Mercy Lewis affirmed that she had. The afflicted girls charged her with having hurt them in many ways and tempting them to sign the book of the devil. Ann Putnam even went so far as to say that Bishop called the devil her God. Bishop continued to proclaim her innocence by saying that she "never saw these persons before, nor [ever] was in this place before." She claimed to be as "innocent as an unborn child."

At that point, Mary Walcott said that her brother Jonathan had torn Bishop's coat while fighting off her specter. When they examined Bishop's coat, they found the tear in exactly the same location. Judge Hathorne continued the attack on Bishop when he accused her of bewitching her first husband to death. She shook her head no in response to the question, which set the afflicted girls into fits. Sam Braybrook affirmed that although she told him

that she had been accused of witchcraft ten years ago, "she was no witch and the devil cannot hurt her."

Bridget Bishop apparently became frustrated with Hathorne's continual attack on her character and his disbelief in her innocence. Her deferential attitude soon gave way to anger as she slowly realized that denial was not an effective strategy. The following interchange between Bishop and Hathorne is very memorable and often quoted.

Bishop staunchly stated, "I am no witch," to which Hawthorne replied, "Why if you have not wrote in the book, yet tell me how far you have gone? Have you not to do with familiar spirits?"

"I have no familiarity with the devil."

"How is it then that your appearance doth hurt these?"

"I am innocent," Bishop insisted.

"Why do you seem to act witchcraft before us, by the motion of your body, which seems to have influence upon the afflicted?"

"I know nothing of it. I am innocent to a witch. I know not what a witch is."

"How do you know then that you are not a witch?" Hathorne demanded.

"I do not know what you say."

"How can you know, you are no witch, and yet not know what a witch is?"

"I am clear: if I were any such person you should know it," Bishop again insisted.

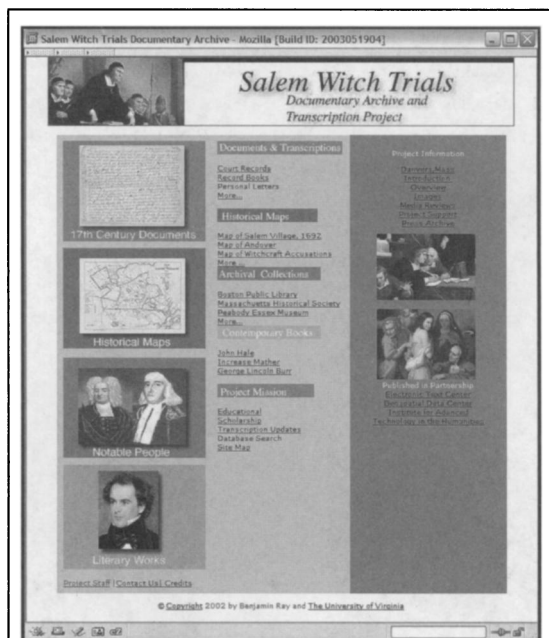
"You may threaten, but you can do no more than you are permitted."

"I am innocent of a witch."

After this comment, Bridget apparently rolled her eyes towards heaven. Immediately, all the girls rolled theirs, and it seemed to the court that a devil was on the loose. After this examination, Bishop was asked if she was not troubled to see the afflicted girls so tormented. She answered no. When asked if she thought they were bewitched, she answered that she did not know what to think about them.

During Bishop's examination before the magistrates, the afflicted girls behaved as if they were tortured. It seemed that by casting her eye upon them, Bishop could strike them down into fits. The only thing that would stop these fits was the touch of her hand upon the girls. Abigail Hobbs, a woman who had already confessed to being a witch, played into this drama by testifying that Bishop's specter tormented her because of her confession. She also affirmed that Bishop had been present at a meeting of witches, in a field at Salem Village, and took part in a diabolical sacrament.

In addition to this evidence, evidence of other previous witchcraft was brought to light. Bishop was accused of murdering



The Salem Witch Trials Documentary Archive and Transcription Project website at <<http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/>>.

children, bewitching pigs, and coming to various townsmen during the night. In further evidence, “poppets” were found in the wall of her cellar. These puppets were made of rags and hogs’ bristles, with headless pins in them. Bishop could “give no account unto the court, that was reasonable or tolerable.” The final piece of damning evidence was when a jury of women found a “preternatural teat” upon her body. Within three hours, the teat had disappeared, adding to the intrigue.

## Part II

The purpose of the second part of the lesson is to engage students in thinking about the ways in which the witch trials have been represented in images through time, since it is now one of the recurring icons of the American cultural imagination.

Illustrations depicting the Salem witch trials began to appear in popular history books and in literary magazines in the mid-nineteenth century together with some large oil paintings created in response to growing public interest in the trials. In Salem today, there are museum displays with life size mannequins and wax figures that depict scenes from the witch trials, and illustrations often appear in newspapers and magazine stories about the trials. Although included in this lesson plan, the images can be found in

two other places. On the archive entry page, <<http://etext.virginia.edu/salem/witchcraft/>>, click on the word “images.” This links to a page of seven images by various artists. Many other images can be accessed at “Notable People” section in the Archive, located on the entry page. This opens a page with names of people involved in the witch trials. Several of them have become popular subjects of artists’ imaginations, for example Tituba, Rebecca Nurse, Giles Corey, George Jacobs Sr., Judge John Hathorne, Susannah Martin, and Rev. George Burroughs.

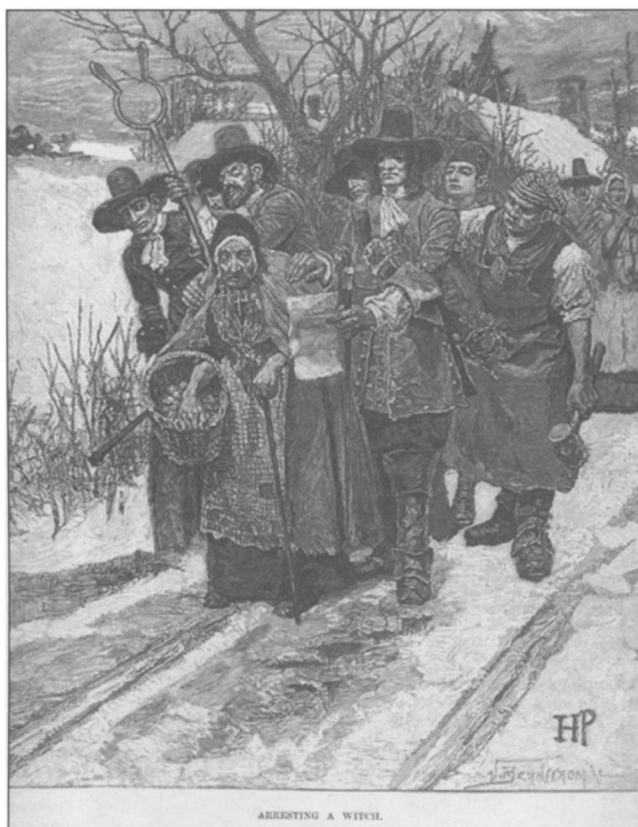
## Compare two images of the Salem witch trials

1) Choose two illustrations. Look carefully at these images: How does the artist portray the accusers and the accused? Compare and contrast them.

2) With whom does the artist seem to sympathize—accusers or accused? How does the artist show this?

1. What kind of stereotypes do you see in these illustrations? Has the artist included anything that seems unexpected or different from what you might have imagined? Explain.

2. What kind of overall moral perspective does the artist try to give on the Salem witch trials?



“Arresting a Witch” shows a woman being arrested for witchcraft, depicted conventionally as an old hag by the famous illustrator Howard Pyle. (*Harpers New Monthly Magazine* 67 [1883]: 221).



“Witch Hill or The Salem Martyr” by Thomas Noble Slatterwhite, 1869. This image of a modest girl about to be hanged for witchcraft contrasts sharply with Howard Pyle’s image on the left. (Image courtesy of the New-York Historical Society, New York City)

For example, there is a series of pictures showing women, young and old, being arrested for witchcraft and/or being taken to Gallows Hill. Our cultural stereotype of the witch is generally that of an old crone—a disagreeable looking social outcast, who is also rather dangerous. This is how Howard Pyle seems to portray the woman in his illustration “Arresting a Witch.” A closer look reveals that this old crone appears stupefied—hardly realizing what is happening. Pyle does not show her to be a defiant “wicked witch of the east,” all angry and ready to attack her pursuers, but rather a helpless beggar dressed in rags, who has apparently been scavenging potatoes from the village fields. Notice, too, the group of angry men crowding around the man sent to arrest her. They look like a gang of bullies, some also appear curious and fearful—ganging up on this poor old woman.

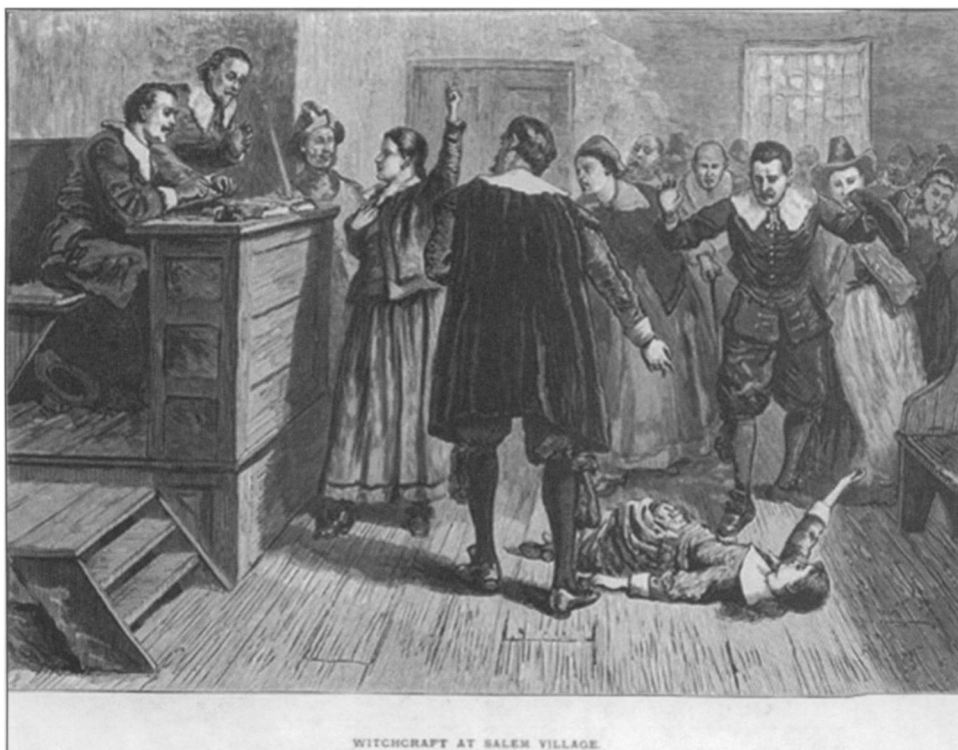
Compare Pyle’s picture with Noble’s “Salem Martyr.” Noble’s painting shows a beautiful young woman being led to the gallows, wearing a saintly-looking expression. What is she being persecuted for? She is no vicious old crone. She looks like a gentle, spiritual martyr, perhaps a follower of some outlawed form of religion—a wistful heretic whom the Puritans love to hate?

Both artists present different views of the witchcraft trials, and both are sympathetic to the accused. Even though these artists are depicting an event that happened over three hundred years ago, it still has meaning for them and for us. By



“Examination of a Witch”

Generally supposed to represent an event in the Salem witch trials, an earlier version of this painting was exhibited by the artist in New York in 1848 with a quotation from John Greenleaf Whittier’s book *Supernaturalism of New England*, 1847: “Mary Fisher, a young girl, was seized upon by Deputy Governor Bellingham in the absence of Governor Endicott, and shamefully stripped for the purpose of ascertaining whether she was a witch, with the Devil’s mark upon her.” (Painting by Thompkins H. Matteson, 1853. Photograph courtesy of Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA.)



“Witchcraft at Salem Village”

In this courtroom scene, an accused woman holds her right hand over her heart and gestures upward—as though she were declaring her innocence before God—while an “afflicted” girl falls on the floor in front of the judge’s bench. (From William A. Crafts, *Pioneers in the Settlement of America*, Vol. I [Boston: Samuel Walker & Company, 1876].)



looking into the faces of these Puritan characters, the artists suggest that they could be us and that we are supposed to learn from recognizing the similarity. Students might draw analogies here—does Pyle's picture look like the authorities badgering a homeless person? Does Noble's look like the religious fanatics victimizing someone of a different faith?

The purpose of this lesson plan is thus two fold: to stimulate and guide critical thinking about primary source documents—the very stuff of historical research—and also to stimulate and guide critical thinking about historical themes in American culture, as depicted in artistic works. □

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"Execution of Mrs. Ann Hibbins" by F. T. Merrill, 1886.

This illustration depicts the execution of Ann Hibbins on Boston Commons in 1657. (From Clarence W. Hobbs, *Lynn and Surroundings* [Lynn, MA: Lewis & Winship Publishers, 1886], 52.)

"Witchcraft in Colonial America: A Matter of Lies and Death" by Steven McCracken, 2001.

A scene of "afflicted" girls in Salem, accusing a woman of witchcraft. (*Washington Post*, "KidsPost", 31 October 2001. © Washington Post.)

